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Citation style: Borkowska Ewa. (2013). The traces of otherness : the mediterranean culture in Walter Pater and Zbigniew Herbert. W: D. Gabryś-Barker, J. Mydla (red.), "English studies at the University of Silesia: forty years on". (S. 189-202). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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The Traces of Otherness The Mediterranean Culture in Walter Pater and Zbigniew Herbert

Why this essay? Both dedicated and indebted to Greek (and Roman) culture, both sensitive to aesthetic values of literature, Walter Pater (1839—1894), an English aesthete, writer and critic of arts of the fin-de-siècle and Zbigniew Herbert (1924—1998), one of the greatest Polish poets of the 20th century are somehow similar in their reflections on literature, art, and historical times. Pater owes his fame to an inspiring opus *The Renaissance Studies* while Herbert's Mr Cogito is not only the poet's alter ego but also the spokesman of the poet's most discrete thoughts and reflections concerning life, mortality, and immortality ("otherness"). Most interestingly, Herbert expressed his political thoughts in the times when freedom in his homeland was much threatened and man's "open, vulnerable and porous" self (Charles Taylor) had to be "buffered." Therefore, the reference to ancient culture of Greeks and Romans could serve as the best way of camouflaging one's true thoughts and expressing what had to remain understated. Pater and Herbert were great thinkers, good philosophers of literature, and eminent writers whose styles of writing in English (of the former) and in Polish (of the latter) can expose best philological qualities in the sense "philology" was once defined by Nietzsche as "the goldsmith's art and connoisseurship of words." This is the reason I selected this essay as one in which I wished to show my ultimate dedication and gratitude to both men of letters, my high respect for most eminent philologists of their times who became great "jewelers of words" never afraid of writing freely about what haunted their minds and puzzled their thoughts.

That which struggles for light is morally fragile.
And when on the horizon appears the cross-
section of a tree, stained with blood, unreally large
and truly painful, do not forget to bless the
miracle.
Zbigniew Herbert, "Dawn"

He [Byron] said: *The end is everywhere,*
Art still has truth, take refuge there.

Matthew Arnold, *Memorial Verses*

In the preface to his seminal work *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Walter Pater explains why he included in it an essay on Winckelmann, the 18th-century

German art historian and a student of Plato. Pater claims that he wished to pay tribute to the German artist for his enthusiastic glorification of “the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake”, his devotion to Hellenism and “his lifelong struggle to attain to the Greek spirit”¹ so joyfully hailed in the Renaissance. Pater’s chief intention was to “contribute to a renaissance of the spirit of individuals and of the age by creating superbly crafted portraits of a representative number of historical personages who, each in a distinctive way, had mastered their environment and contributed to one complete type of general culture.”² Winckelmann as well as other artists venerated by Pater, such as Leonardo da Vinci or Pico della Mirandola, emerge as the ideal representatives of cultural renaissance; they “penetrate into the antique world by their passion and temperament.” Pater’s essays in *The Renaissance* can well compare with Zbigniew Herbert’s re-discovery of Piero della Francesca’s art in his volume called *Barbarian in the Garden*, both works concerned with the mystery of encounter of an artist with an aesthetic mind of the Renaissance genius. The Renaissance left equally impressive traces on the Victorian England (Pater) as on the Polish poet since its iconography was a “subdued and graceful mystery...that pleased the eye,” “satisfied the soul”³ and helped avert one’s eyes from what was aesthetically repulsive in the age of mechanical reproduction (in the case of Pater) and in the era of socialist realism in post-war Poland (in the case of Zbigniew Herbert).

The portrait of Winckelmann, “the quick susceptible enthusiast” of arts, recalls the image of the Polish poet as it depicts a man indebted to the culture other than his own, the one which compels him to travel out of a dark age into the light of spiritual freedom. For Winckelmann it is “Greek art, the richly intuited Hellenic world” and religion that provide him with the “cloistral refuge from the world of vulgarity;” in Pater’s words:

The Dorian worship of Apollo, rational, chastened, debonair, with his unbroken daylight, always opposed to the sad Chthonian divinities, is the aspiring element, by force and spring of which Greek religion sublimates itself. Out of Greek religion, under happy conditions, arises Greek art, to minister to human culture. It was the privilege of Greek religion to be able to transform itself into an artistic ideal.⁴

The cult of the Greeks described as “chastened and debonair” implies something that is never outright but rather “beckoning and receding,” “veiled in its explicitness,” within the richly various materials of his [Pater’s] prose”, as Linda Dowling

¹ Walter Pater: “Winckelmann,” in: William E. Buckler, ed., *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts (The Renaissance, Appreciations and Imaginary Portraits)* (New York UP, 1986), 183—215.

² Buckler, ed.: *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 11.

³ Buckler, ed.: *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 16.

⁴ Buckler, ed.: *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 199.

justly remarks.⁵ Herbert's essay "Among the Dorians" (in *Barbarian in the Garden*) is preceded by the quotation from Aristotle in which the philosopher extols "harmony of the Dorians" as a promise of "a perfect tranquillity." Herbert, in the same way as Pater in his "Winckelmann" essay, venerates the Dorian style and architecture with their "numerical proportion" and "mathematical precision" which make Greek art "apodictic, an imperative of our consciousness."⁶

With fascination Herbert tells the story of the secrets of Greek stone architecture, the most difficult art of stone cutting and the temples "chiselled from a single stone."⁷ It may be the reason why, when referring to Herbert's poems, Tom Paulin defines them as "underground messages passed to us from the graveyards of Europe."⁸ Saturated with classical mythology and its reference and relevance to contemporary world, the poems become the utterances of Mr Cogito or voices from the mythological underworld. The encounter with Mr Cogito becomes in fact the meeting with No one from Nowhere, the (no) one whose thinking, paradoxically, or against his name, never leads to the revelation of "I AM". Lascaux cave, described in the first essay of *Barbarian in the Garden* collection, is the hollow place, the geographical nowhere, known only to an art historian familiar with the Palaeolithic descent of the earliest wall paintings. Though it is not located on the map, it can be traced as several other images and things in Herbert's poetry, homeless, anonymous, accidental but, most significantly, reminiscent of the past, the vestiges of the origin of Western civilization (Greek and Roman). His writing touches on the mystery of encounter, describes and reflects on the spots where different cultures meet and influence one another, and his penetrative aptitude remains similar to that of Winckelmann once compared with Columbus; in Pater's words:

he had a way of estimating at once the slightest indication of the land, in a floating weed or passing bird; he seemed actually to come nearer to nature than other men. And that world in which others had moved with so much embarrassment, seems to call out in Winckelmann new senses fitted to deal with it.⁹

Winckelmann's is the unique fancy "of the reminiscence of a forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in the mind itself," the mind of one who was at once lover and philosopher, the "great discoverer" in his intellectual voyage.

⁵ Linda Dowling: *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 94.

⁶ Zbigniew Herbert: *Barbarian in the Garden*. Trans. Michael March and Jaroslaw Anders (London—New York: A Harvest Book, 1985), 27.

⁷ Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 26.

⁸ Tom Paulin, *Minotaur. Poetry and the Nation State* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1992), 204.

⁹ Buckler, ed.: *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 193.

The poet's quest for the traces of European heritage reminds us of Walter Benjamin's fascination with the (baroque) ruin which he describes in the context of allegory and *Trauerspiel* in his seminal work *The Origin of German Drama*. The broken pieces of architecture, as Benjamin tells us, recall or "bear witness to the miracle" of how the "sacred edifice has withstood even the most elemental forces of destruction."¹⁰ Benjamin refers to the Renaissance painters and the picturesque settings in their artworks in which figures are often placed against the "ruins of antique temple" that "represent transitory splendour." The ruin becomes the trace, a kind of "pars pro toto", the synecdochial "legacy of antiquity" from which "the new whole," that is the new art, "is mixed"¹¹. Mr Cogito, Herbert's paradoxically anonymous character, almost like Pater's Winckelmann, (dis)covers his identity when travelling through the places of the Mediterranean culture which appeal to him by their speechless images (that is through the works of art), in a language that needs no words. What seems to attract Herbert to the Greek tradition is perhaps the unity and integrity that are no longer observed in contemporary world. In order to restore it and retrieve the remnants of classical culture Herbert makes trips to the places which, in his view, become the most legitimate traces of Greek and Roman antiquity. The most credible legacy can be found in wall paintings of Lascaux, in the Italian works of art and Greek architectural style with its geometrical perfection, all of which have passed, if only fragmented (that is in ruins), into our times.

The location of Greek colonies on the Black Sea and round half the Mediterranean in the times when the south of Italy was called *Magna Grecia* and the encounter of the tribe called *Graii* with the Romans have finally fixed the Latinized name of Greeks. When Matthew Arnold comes to define culture he derives the concept of "sweetness and light" from Hellenism, the originally Greek conception which was to enter art and learning of all European countries. It may be as well that Herbert's metaphor of the "barbarian in the garden" is a reference to Greece that has always been a focus of light for the outer peoples (the word "barbarians" indicated all people who did not speak Greek) to whom she owed much of her strength and the seeds of culture. Christian civilization is greatly indebted to its Greek ancestor whose legacy can be observed in several practices and rituals such as processions, sacrifices and religious ceremonies in which, however, hero-worship is replaced by the reverence and adoration of Christian God. The fact that in the earliest times of Christianity "the time-honoured 'stocks and stones' were worshipped with more favour than the statues of famous deities"¹² proves that the influence of Hellenism must have been very strong and inspiring. In his Winckelmann essay, Pater goes as far as to suggest that there is "a certain antique" and "as it were pagan grandeur in

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Drama*, trans. John Osborne (Frankfurt am Mein, 1963), 178.

¹¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Drama*, 178.

¹² A.R. Hope Moncrieff, *Classical Mythology. Myth and Legends* (London: Senate, 1994), 8.

the Roman Catholic religion.¹³ The legacy of Roman culture is also of significant importance since the transformation of Greek gods into their Latin counterparts allows for an amalgamation of cultures and their expansion far across the Adriatic. Herbert's veneration of Marcus Aurelius finds its expression in the poem dedicated to the Emperor of Rome in which the poet praises the famous Roman for his virtues of goodness, justice and his "greatness" which he finds "too immense" (as in the poem "To Marcus Aurelius").

The attraction to Hellenism can be a response or a counterbalance to, perhaps, too long an attachment to Hebraism, the two contrastive attitudes which Arnold accounts for in his *Culture and Anarchy*. In it, Hellenism which implies "cultivation of the aesthetic and intellectual understanding of life" contrasts with morality, devotion to work, strength and "strictness to conscience"¹⁴ characteristic of Hebraism. In Herbert, the metaphor of a "barbarian" refers to the one who arrives from the outward (other), that is non-Greek culture and prefers "sweetness" to light and charm to intelligence. The "barbarian" enters the garden, attracted by the world of culture in which he becomes a civilized man of light, that light which so fascinated the poet in the Renaissance painting. In his Winckelmann essay, Pater recalls Dante's joy on his way out from the darkness of the *Inferno* to the "sharp and joyful sense of light... in the opening of *Purgatorio*,"¹⁵ which is symbolically reflected in the Hellenistic principle of the intellectual light so enthusiastically greeted by the Renaissance a few centuries later.

The law of light (and when there is light there can be discerned the traces and the shadows) is very important for the Greeks since it allows them to see things genuinely, as they are, in their natural beauty and fidelity to nature. The light that illuminates in Torrentius' painting "Still Life with a Bridle" (which is also the title of Herbert's collection of essays) has "its source," as Herbert explains, "beyond the painted scene," "defines the figures with geometric precision" but it never sinks in the depths, always comes back in it reflected.¹⁶ Hellenism, that "pursuit of sweetness and light" in Arnold's view, indicates a "free play of consciousness" and helps man to learn "the best that has been known and said in the world" (which is Arnold's famous definition of culture) to minister to his spiritual needs. The way to the Greeks leads through the "exit from the dungeon" to the defence of civilization which prevents cruelty and repression, as is proclaimed in Herbert's poem "Anabasis" that describes the odyssey of the Greeks:

they made the journey without the Bible without prophets
without burning bushes

¹³ Buckler, ed., *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 189.

¹⁴ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Norton Company, 1993), Vol. 2, 1408—1409.

¹⁵ Buckler, ed., *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 190.

¹⁶ Zbigniew Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (New York: Vintage, 1994), 103.

without signs on the earth without signs in the sky
with the cruel consciousness that life is great¹⁷

When the signs are erased there will be no justice and cruelty will triumph; the inscription, in whatever sense, is indispensable. During his Mediterranean odyssey, the poet finds the most significant intellectual and spiritual traces (“signs on the earth”) of Western culture in both Greek and Roman civilizations. Interestingly, the etymology of the word “trace” goes back to “trekken” (Old High German) which means “to draw the line” and, as such, transports us to the art of painting that has always been the inspiration for both Winckelmann (and Pater) and Herbert. In his Piero della Francesca essay Herbert, in a short comment, expresses his admiration for the Renaissance painter for, as he claims, the “absence of psychological expression”¹⁸ in favour of something more important, the “*lucidus ordo* — an eternal order of light and balance” over “the battle of shadows, convulsions, and tumult.”¹⁹ The painter embraced the whole drama of life and death in his “Resurrection” painting in which we find the concrete, restrained and hieratic figure of Christ with solid peasant features placed in the middle of the painting, the most ingenious application of the principles of inertia and motion. Piotr Siemaszko seems to aptly characterize the world presented by Herbert in his aesthetic interpretations of the works of art. He finds in them the key to understanding of the poet’s message, very similar to that of Walter Pater: “while the world of nature is the domain of changeability, dynamics, disintegration and chaos, the work of art is a rationally constructed harmony.”²⁰

The study of the ancient masters of art, of which della Francesca is only one of the most illuminating examples, allows the poet, by imitating the Renaissance clarity and harmony, to pursue an elegant writing in the most oppressive times of the totalitarian regime in which he lives. What Herbert appreciates in the Renaissance painters is their monumental style, meditative grandeur, a closer examination of well constructed anatomy of bodies, a unique sense of perspective and their interest in geometry which allows them to draw out all shapes (especially oval) in such a way that they look real and natural. The architectural decoration in della Francesca’s paintings, the distance between the figures, more room everywhere and a convincing amplitude of air are the elements always missing in the architectural style of socialist realism in which the poet grows up. The biblical scenes presented in his artworks, piety and curiosity of detail which do not prevent the painter from remaining uniquely sensual and the absolute harmony of composition can serve as the iconographical inspiration for the poet. The Renaissance painting appeals to

¹⁷ Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford University Press, 1977), 49.

¹⁸ Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 153.

¹⁹ Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 153.

²⁰ Piotr Siemaszko, *Zmienność i trwanie. O eseistyce Zbigniewa Herberta* (Bydgoszcz: Instytut Wydawniczy Świadekstwo, 1996), 54.

Herbert by light rather than colour, by sharp lineaments and contour, which contrasts the inside from the outside, by geometrical figuration and dramatization of characters, usually set in deserted landscapes or against the abysmal background, significant and eloquent. When alluding to the painter's biography Herbert makes the most arresting remark: "he [Piero della Francesca] has received the greatest act of mercy by absent-minded history, which mislays documents and blurs all traces of life [...] His entire being is in his *œuvre*."²¹ The loss of documents and even anecdotes concerning the painter's personal life, passion, love, ambition, anger or sorrows (another anonymous character in Herbert's portrait gallery) can be fully recompensed by his aesthetic traces, his great works of art that he left behind.

Unlike the Italian painter, Herbert can only address himself as the "barbarian in the garden," the one who enters the realm of art (be it in Italy or Greece) as an intruder from the barbaric part of Europe where culture and art have been deliberately devastated. At the end of his della Francesca's essay, the poet recalls the scene (of which he may have read in della Francesca's biography) in which a little boy Marco di Longara is walking in Borgo San Sepolcro (the birthplace of the painter) with a blind man; the boy walking with della Francesca himself "could not have known that his hand was leading light."²² What the poet learns from the painter is that man should take life quietly, with composure, without emotions which, in his paintings, are entirely controlled if not completely obliterated and absorbed by geometry (cf. della Francesca's painting "The Hebrew's Torture"). "The principle of tranquillity" is the one of "inner order;" his stoic heroes are "constrained and impassive," his creations always presented in "their eternal armour."²³

The expression "still life with the bridle" (the title of Torrentius' painting and Herbert's collection of essays) may serve as a possible metaphor for censorship (the bridle as a part of harness), restraint, and the limitation imposed on the aesthetic work. Herbert's texts, as manifestations of total freedom of expression, bear no trace of punctuation since the poet makes them sound close to current speech (but perhaps the "current speech" heightened, as Hopkins addresses his poetry). Uninterrupted by any punctuation mark, the poem can utter itself only when its musical rests are not artificially imposed but result from its natural breathing. The lines/verses are, as it were, chiselled in stone, silent, or uninterrupted strokes of the painter's hand armed with a brush which smoothly slips over the canvas. The subversion of the official form becomes a gesture of defence against the "state apparatus of punctuation."²⁴

Herbert proposes the poetry of a mysterious encounter, multicultural rather than one imprisoned in nationalism or monotheistic faith. Paulin best characterizes the tendency which this poetry has always revealed:

²¹ Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 162.

²² Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 162.

²³ Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 159.

²⁴ Paulin, *Minotaur*, 207.

Herbert's positivism is wary and sceptical, though, and he does not recommend a commonplace pragmatism to his readers. With bitter generosity, he incarnates the multi-culturalism of that wonderful vanished state of Poland-Lithuania, and the result is an international poetry which combines a free-floating cosmopolitanism with a demand sense of local responsibility.²⁵

Neither romantic, since he does not believe in romantic emotions, nor positivist, since the latter bears the smack of scepticism, it is a widely international poetry with great sense of hospitality and responsibility for the other. The abundance of references to Greek mythology in Herbert's poetry derives basically from the fact that in it he finds refuge from the vulgarity of the sorrowful ideology imposed on his native country. Greek civilization lay foundations for Western culture and the Greeks themselves were proud of their race, tremendously alive, devoted, enthusiastic, almost divinely arrogant but also versatile and quick-witted. The surrounding, the location of the country, sea air and islands favoured liberty and democracy. Herbert's fascination with the Doric order in architecture, as when he describes his journey to Greece and south Italy, reveals an appreciation of the beauty he could hardly find in ugly looking edifices of socialist realism. The Greeks built with a great sense of "fitness" of things and excellence of construction, mindful of *decorum*, never interested in leaving the mark of their name (anonymity). Greek art exposed the linear and the contour and had always remained geometrically justified. Herbert's fascination with Greek culture mingles, however, with revulsion as when the poet, in his story of Cicero charges the greatest stylist and erudite as Cicero is, with ignoring the fact that the marble veins are in fact the "blood vessels of slaves which have burst in the quarries" (cf. "Classic"). Cicero's ability of "reading inscriptions on stone", his curiosity of seeking the traces of human being, made him blind to cruelty and oppression exercised on man by the progress of civilization.

In Book 9 of the *Odyssey* Odysseus encounters the lotus eaters whose food allows them to lose their desire to return home, in the place which favours oblivion in the lower world. By escaping to the world of the Greeks (but also to the world of the Romans), Herbert seems to seek the place of security and oblivion to the predicament of his homeland. What helps Odysseus survive is the descent into the nether-world where he can hear the prophecy of Tiresias which saves his life. In the like way Herbert descends to the underworld of Greek mythology to escape death, perhaps intellectual death which threatens those who succumb to the officially preached political propaganda. His tremendous intellectual curiosity becomes satisfied by the discovery, like that of the Greeks long before, that a clear brain is capable of much more sustained and much better thinking than one that remains contaminated by

²⁵ Paulin, *Minotaur*, 207.

official ideology. Circe turns Odysseus' companions into "swine" and uses her drugs to make them forget their fatherland. Odysseus, on the other hand, receives the necessary occult knowledge from Hermes (hermeneutic power protects him against the danger) who serves as his guide in this dangerous encounter. Odysseus is given the *pharmakon*, a plant with a black root and a white blossom which is a gift restricted to the chosen few (as a gift of interpretation), an exclusive knowledge which helps him avert the danger and pass through darkness to light. A political allusion to the situation in Herbert's homeland is almost immediate; many a man subscribe to the regime in search, as Norman Davies puts it, of pure careerism, the temptation the poet has always been strong enough to resist.

In "Mr Cogito — the Return" the eponymous character, like Odysseus, decides to return home despite the fact that he discerns the frontier, a ploughed "murderous shooting towers/ dense thickets of wire" and realizes the danger of official junk rhetoric, the "black foam of newspapers." Paradoxically, the return to his homeland is the descent into the underground, the only place free and independent, first in the partitioned Poland and then in the country under the repressing communism. Herbert's descent into the underground to penetrate the submerged culture is due to the fact that all overground activity has been persecuted and censored. Moreover, his great respect for the individual culture, especially that of the 12th and 13th centuries, comes from his admiration for honour, dignity, integrity, equality and condemnation of whatever is barbaric and brute, the ideas most resented and suppressed by the regime.

Herbert's voyage to Crete and other places in the heart of Greek culture, is described in a kind of diary-journal called *The Labyrinth on the Sea*. Before her sanctuaries emerged in the sun, the heart of Greece was beating underground, as we read in Herbert's posthumously published work in which the Greek "spirit" as well as Greek iconography of caves, grottoes, labyrinths and chiasmuses constitute a unique cultural landscape. In this first imaginary landscape the poet got immersed long before he took the real *inscape* of it during his voyage. The references to Arthur Evans, the author of *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, the "patriarch of the Mediterranean archeology"²⁶ who was in love with Crete, contribute to the poet's own descriptions of Minoan Civilization and Mycenaean centres long before the arrivals of massive waves of Dorians (to whom the poet also dedicates one of his essays). Winckelmann reminds us of Evans, similarly "perfecting himself and developing his genius" (one in architecture and another one in sculpture), "jealously refining his meaning into a form, express, clear, objective."²⁷

In Herbert's poetry the soldier and the prince meet in one, the poet, architect and a sculptor seem to cooperate. What Hamlet had only inaugurated he, the poet, must complete. What was left in silence (cf. "the rest is silence") must be articulated

²⁶ Zbigniew Herbert, *Labirynt nad morzem* (Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich, 2000), 32.

²⁷ Buckler, ed., *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 209.

in poetic verse, despite general ban of speaking the truth, despite threats and fear. Perfecting oneself, as was Winckelmann's ambition, corresponds with the poet's fighting for truth which is thus described in one of his interviews:

Telling the truth is the fundamental obligation of intellectuals, and the only possible justification for society's largesse towards them. To think means trying to define who we are and what surrounds us. The intellectuals carry the grave responsibility for the use of words [in society].²⁸

The intellectual should be sensitive to taste since it is "the power of taste" that "commands us to get out to make a wry face draw out a sneer if for this the precious capital of the body the head must fall".²⁹ Despite essential anonymity and selflessness "Cogito" is the name that parodies thinking, that thought-process which runs with the de-capitated body ("the head must fall", as we read in the poet's words).

Herbert seems to identify with "those cultures that have been obliterated from the 'religious map of the world' because they help him encode Polish history."³⁰ In *Barbarian in the Garden*, his cultural and intellectual guide-book through Europe, he shows his fascination with the extant and half-vanished cultures, almost entirely forgotten by history, but helping him to "nonplus the censor" and explain a lot that is inscribed but never explicitly articulated in Polish culture. It is very significant when in the times of the deep darkness of ubiquitous totalitarian ideology the poet's recourse is to all possible tricks in order to make his reader aware that freedom, respect for the other and the sense of dignity are natural human rights, the ones that will be one day regained. In his addressing the Greek as well as other individual cultures which have compellingly attracted his attention, the poet wishes to proclaim *inter alia* what can by no means be officially published. As Gerard Manley Hopkins in Victorian England, Herbert gropes around in classical languages to find etymological will-of-the-wisps of the words whose meanings will best render his poetic secrets, without in the least betraying his political intentions. For both poets the language of the Greeks seems to be the most adequate and attractive means of self-expression, as Paulin justly remarks in his book:

If we can identify a single word which would be the key to a dead civilization, like *kalos kagathos* for the Greeks, and *virtus* for the Romans, such a word for the South would be *paratge*, declined innumerable times in the troubadours' poems, and meaning honour, integrity, equality, condemnation of brute force, and respect for individuals.³¹

²⁸ *The Sarmatian Review* 15 (No. 2, April 1995), 312.

²⁹ *The Sarmatian Review* 15 (No. 2, April 1995), 312.

³⁰ Paulin, *Minotaur*, 210.

³¹ Paulin, *Minotaur*, 210.

Such words as “integrity, honour and equality” were for a long time erased from an official, that is communist jargon; they were rarely, if at all, used in the most lacerated language of political propaganda since they were immediately associated with the most hostile aristocratic descent of the Polish elite. Herbert’s intellectual acumen dictated him to construct the most tortuously metaphorical political lexicon which would vex even the most intelligent censors whose duty it was to bawdlerize all that was officially published in Poland under regime.

The difference between East and West was basically in that Western countries could easily pride themselves in their “bourgeois enjoyment of art, leisure and historical absence”³² while the Eastern countries were never free from political and social anxiety. The Western countries could freely investigate the traces of their predecessors and draw from the treasury of culture handed down to them by their ancestors. In the “Elegy of Fortinbrass” Herbert focuses on one of the Hamletian heroes, a rather minor character from Shakespeare’s drama since he is not so much concerned with an elegant and intellectual prince of Denmark as with a military tough-minded and anti-romantic king of Norway (whose name comes from what he represents, “strong in arms”). Again, the “classical temper” of Fortinbrass is reminiscent of the decline of Western civilization (“The Elegy of Fortinbrass”):

Anyhow you had to perish Hamlet you were not for life
 you believed in crystal notions not in human clay
 always twitching as if asleep you hunted chimeras
 wolfishly you crunched the air only to vomit
 you knew no human thing you did not know even how to breathe

The end of the elegy with its “archipelagos,” sea breathing and waters can refer as much to the north of Europe as to Greece whose location in the south is quiet similar but whose climate, which is a conclusive hope in the finale of the poem, is much warmer.

Seamus Heaney, a great admirer of Herbert’s poetry, remarks that there are similarities between Herbert’s characters and those from Greek mythology or, perhaps, they are deliberately constructed in such a way as to recall those from the world of antiquity. In his Eliot lectures collected in *The Government of the Tongue* we find the Irish poet’s interestingly concluding that Herbert appears to us with the “strength of Anteus,” the Greek hero who drew his power from the earth and remained invincible until defeated by Hercules. Like Anteus, Herbert is both firmly embedded in the ground and the “sleeping giant” who will one day wake up to “lead his people to their true inheritance.”³³ We find one of Heaney’s poems dedicated to Herbert in his recently published volume *Electric Light* in which the Greek “spirit,”

³² Paulin, *Minotaur*, 213.

³³ Neil Corcoran, *A Student’s Guide to Seamus Heaney* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986), 100.

as has always been the case, resurfaces to haunt Herbert's poems ("To the Shade of Zbigniew Herbert"):

You were one of those from the back of the north wind
Whom Apollo favoured and would keep going back to
In the winter season. And among your people you
Remained his herald whenever he'd departed
And the land was silent and summer's promise thwarted.
You learned the lyre from him and kept it tuned.³⁴

Compared to Apollo, the Polish poet is recognized as the best "lyre-player" of his times, the one who is a "herald" of the ancient god of music with which nobody dares compete until the moment he is challenged by Marsyas. In the poem "Apollo and Marsyas" Herbert seems to take part, as the Greek god, in the "real duel" of "perfect pitch" (Apollo) with "immense range" (Marsyas) and his music defeats that of the flutist (Marsyas), which marks the triumph of talent (grace) over good skill.

The Epilogue. Still-life of the Dutch

Herbert's fascination with the Greeks does not impoverish his interest in other arts of which the most important one is the Dutch painting that carries as well important political and aesthetic implications. Why does Herbert respond so vigorously to the speechlessness of painting, especially manifest in still-life and the landscape, being at the same time so generously endowed with the gift of word? Is not word more powerful and expressive than silence with its images and inscriptions on the canvas? The poet seems to face the similar dilemmas:

I know well, too well, all the agonies and vain effort of what is called description, and also the audacity of translating the wonderful language of painting into the language — as voluminous, as receptive as hell — in which court verdicts and love novels are written. I don't even know very well what inclines me to undertake these efforts. I would like to believe that it is my impervious ideal that requires me to pay it clumsy homage.³⁵

The poet explains that the "intermediary of painting" allows him to "experience **the grace of meeting** the Ionian philosophers of nature" from whom he learns that "concepts sprouted only from things" and also that "deadly abstractions had not drunk all the blood of reality to the end."³⁶ The encounter with painting, especially with the Dutch still-life collection, seems to bring the poet close to modern art in the way Gadamer explains the idea of "the speechless image" in the *Relevance of*

³⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light. Poems* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001), 81.

³⁵ Herbert, *Still-Life*, 101.

³⁶ Herbert, *Still-Life*, 102.

the Beautiful: “Compositional freedom thus begins with the subject-matter itself, and to that extent the still-life anticipates the compositional freedom of modern art, in which we find no trace of mimesis at all, and in which total speechlessness rules supreme.”³⁷ The description of still life paintings resembles that of Winckelmann’s sculptures which, with their generality and repose, render best the aura of the Hellenic culture.

The speechless art of Dutch painting recalls the reading of hermetic books, which seems to be “a taste of Great Adventure:” “it is a marvellous wandering of uninitiated thought through exotic lands.”³⁸ In it the poet finds the secret language of symbols and images which escape definition but call for the “Method” the submission to which becomes a kind of belief, even ideological obsession. In the poet’s words:

Without attaining initiation, spurned by the Mystery of the chosen, I fell into the hell of the aesthetes. Truly beautiful are those constructions of liberated minds: vertiginous pyramids of spirit, monuments of air, mirrorlike labyrinths of allegory, precious animals and stones; green jasper, the sign of luminosity; blue sapphire, truth; golden topaz, harmony.³⁹

Entering the world of art is like joining the secret society whose meetings take place in a chapel-sanctuary, the museum of symbols with “sculptures, inscriptions, a lamp that would be extinguished when noninitiated person approached, old books, complicated geometrical figures on the floor, and ingenious vaults.”⁴⁰ Dutch art seems to be more Hebraic than Hellenic and “Still Life with a bridle” is the most illuminating example of allegory that implies restraint, discipline and order, all dangerous as they restrain man’s freedom.

There seems to be no single model in man’s life but the harmony of the contraries: order and chaos, discipline and freedom, strictness and spontaneity, which Herbert aptly calls the cardinal virtues of Moderation when interpreting the image of the “bridle” in Torrentius’ painting. Pater, in turn, suggests a combination of Greek sensuousness with Christian asceticism which, despite the mutual resistance of the two, plays an important role in the preservation of European identity and “keeps unbroken the thread of its tradition.”⁴¹ The sensuous touch of Hellenism awakens new hopes and aspirations to which only the most sensitive, spiritually responsive and, perhaps, reasonably and never uncritically thinking minds can succumb. In his Winckelmann essay Pater, like Herbert in his poetic and prose writing, appreciates

³⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, trans. N. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 85.

³⁸ Herbert, *Still Life*, 107.

³⁹ Herbert, *Still Life*, 107.

⁴⁰ Herbert, *Still Life*, 108.

⁴¹ Buckler, ed., *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 212.

the fact that the light of the Greeks can illuminate the life of the modernists (and that of East European culture, as in Herbert). Both the artist and the poet consent that the Greek “spirit” that permeates Western art contributes to the perfection of human nature and “preserves the identity of European culture;” in Pater’s concluding words:

Breadth, centrality, with blithness and repose, are the marks of Hellenic culture. Is such culture a lost art? The local, accidental colouring of its own age has passed from it; and the greatness that is dead looks greater when every link with what is slight and vulgar has been severed. We can only see it at all in the reflected, refined light which a great education creates for us. Can we bring down that ideal into the gaudy, perplexed light of modern life?⁴²

Source

Ewa Borkowska, (ed.) 2004: *In the Space of Arts: Interdisciplinary, Identity and (post)Modernity*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.

⁴² Buckler, ed., *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, 213.